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Stained with Blood: Idealism and Reality in Whitman's Drum Taps

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*Beat! beat! drums!—blow! bugles! blow!
Make no parley—stop for no expostulation . . .
Let not the child's voice be heard, nor the mother's entreaties,
Make even the trestles to shake the dead where they lie awaiting the hearses,
So strong you thump O terrible drums—so loud you bugles blow.
"Beat! Beat! Drums!"*

Within the various iterations of *Leaves of Grass*, 1855, through the authoritative 1892 publication, Walt Whitman's poetic voice and style is revised and reformed by the Civil War's transformative power, from the "poet of democracy...[who] celebrated the mystical, divine potential of the individual" to the poetic witness of war's realistic horror, and the powerlessness of one, Whitman's writing mirrors the courageous individuals represented in *Embattled Courage* as Gerald Linderman similarly notes the same transformation upon the brave men who filled the battle lines.

Jeanne Campbell Reesman, "Walt Whitman, 1819-1892" in *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, ed. Nina Baym (New York: Norton, 2007), C: 17.

- Walt Whitman's poetry and writing, pre, post and during the US Civil War, represents and celebrates the individual and by extension, the nationhood of America.
- Optimism is revealed in the Preface to *Leaves of Grass*, 1855, as the speaker's persona joyously begins Whitman's literary campaign to gather the citizens. "The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem . . . here is not merely a nation but a teeming nation of nations. Here is action untied from strings necessarily blind to particulars and details magnificently moving in vast masses. Here is the hospitality which forever indicates heroes."
- Linderman argues that the soldiers of the Civil War, both North and South, began the war era as courageous and honorable men and that they were transformed by combat from idealistic innocents to hardened, realistic veterans. He notes that courage was an indicator of classic American individualism which mirrored their civilian work ethic.

Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 865-866.

Stained with Blood: Idealism and Reality in Whitman's *Drum Taps*



*I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.
"Song of Myself"*

- The horrific experience of Civil War combat collapsed naïve, idealistic views and changed American literature and culture.
- Linderman illustrates this transformation by showing how impersonal forces dominated the battlefield and victory. Examples include the dominance of courage and honor before the war and the reality of battle being more powerful than individual fortitude which "unraveled [their] convictions."
- Whitman's text cites the despair and horror of the battles and the grisly aftermath, which denied individual courage and faith as the only means to win the war, he too notes the inability of the individual, courageous or not, to realize a satisfactory victory.
- Whitman's deliberate language choices in his poetic prose told the story of honorable men taking up arms to defend the Cause they believed in and were courageous enough to lay down their lives for – this was the "self" that the poet infused his pre and early war poetry with and here is where we see the largest change in tone and language.
- Scholars argue the Civil War's silenced Whitman's poetic voice.
- Whitman, while briefly silent, emerged with a changed style and persona, writing with a renewed perspective on democracy "as a wounded body and in need of compassionate healing and a poetic identity."
- In his postwar prose, in particular, is heard the transformed voice of the joyous recruiter to a despondent witness.
- This new style celebrates the sacrificed limbs and lives of the soldiers, regardless of the uniform they wore.
- Whitman highlights the soldiers, regardless of their uniform, and observes the grisly reality he has witnessed and experienced first-hand.
- Whitman's verse "leads the way" to understanding this courageous conflict through language.

Sychterg, *Silently Watching the Dead*, 10.

*"Old Flag all shot through with fragments of
shell, bullets, etc., its staff shattered, carried
sternly into seven engagements and into the
thickest of the fight, and safely brought out
again—all full of shreds as with the sword,
the silk stained with blood."
excerpt from "Civil War"*



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